

CHAPTER XIII

THE ANSWER OF THE SPHINX

MOONLIGHT in the desert. Jane ordered her after-dinner coffee on the piazza of the hotel, that she might lose as little as possible of the mystic loveliness of the night. The pyramids appeared so huge and solid, in the clear white light; and the Sphinx gathered unto itself more mystery.

Jane promised herself a stroll round by moonlight presently. Meanwhile she lay back in a low wicker chair, comfortably upholstered, sipping her coffee, and giving herself up to the sense of dreamy content which, in a healthy body, is apt to follow vigorous exertion.

Very tender and quiet thoughts of Garth came to her this evening, perhaps brought about by the associations of moonlight.

"The moon shines bright: — in such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,
And they did make no noise —"

Ah! the great poet knew the effect upon the heart of a vivid reminder to the senses. Jane now passed beneath the spell.

To begin with, Garth's voice seemed singing everywhere:

"Enable with perpetual light
The dulness of our blinded sight."

The Answer of the Sphinx 139

Then from out the deep blue and silvery light, Garth's dear adoring eyes seemed watching her. Jane closed her own, to see them better. To-night she did not feel like shrinking from them, they were so full of love.

No shade of critical regard was in them. Ah! had she wronged him with her fears for the future? Her heart seemed full of trust to-night, full of confidence in him and in herself. It seemed to her that if he were here she could go out with him into this brilliant moonlight, seat herself upon some ancient fallen stone, and let him kneel in front of her and gaze and gaze in his persistent way, as much as he pleased. In thought there seemed to-night no shrinking from those dear eyes. She felt she would say: "It is all your own, Garth, to look at when you will. For your sake, I could wish it beautiful; but if it is as you like it, my own Dear, why should I hide it from you?"

What had brought about this change of mind? Had Deryck's prescription done its full work? Was this a saner point of view than the one she had felt constrained to take when she arrived, through so much agony of renunciation, at her decision? Instead of going up the Nile, and then to Constantinople and Athens, should she take the steamer which sailed from Alexandria to-morrow, be in London a week hence, send for Garth, make full confession, and let him decide as to their future?

That he loved her still, it never occurred to Jane to doubt. At the very thought of sending for him and telling him the simple truth, he seemed so near her once more, that she could feel the clasp of his arms, and his head upon her heart. And those dear shining eyes! Oh Garth, Garth!

"One thing is clear to me to-night," thought Jane. "If he still needs me — wants me — I cannot live any longer away from him. I must go to him." She opened her eyes and looked towards the Sphinx. The whole line of reasoning which had carried such weight at Shenstone flashed through her mind in twenty seconds. Then she closed her eyes again and clasped her hands upon her bosom.

"I will risk it," she said; and deep joy awoke within her heart.

A party of English people came from the dining-room on to the piazza with a clatter. They had arrived that evening and gone in late to dinner. Jane had hardly noticed them, — a handsome woman and her daughter, two young men, and an older man of military appearance. They did not interest Jane, but they broke in upon her reverie; for they seated themselves at a table near by and, in truly British fashion, continued a loud-voiced conversation, as if no one else were present. One or two foreigners, who had been peacefully dreaming over coffee and cigarettes, rose and strolled away to quiet seats under the palm trees. Jane would have done the same, but she really felt too comfortable to move, and afraid of losing the sweet sense of Garth's nearness. So she remained where she was.

The elderly man held in his hand a letter and a copy of the *Morning Post*, just received from England. They were discussing news contained in the letter and a paragraph he had been reading aloud from the paper.

"Poor fellow! How too sad!" said the chaperon of the party.

"I should think he would sooner have been killed outright!" exclaimed the girl. "I know I would."

"Oh no," said one of the young men, leaning towards her. "Life is sweet, under any circumstances."

"Oh, but blind!" cried the young voice, with a shudder. "Quite blind for the rest of one's life. Horrible!"

"Was it his own gun?" asked the older woman. "And how came they to be having a shooting party in March?"

Jane smiled a fierce smile into the moonlight. Passionate love of animal life, intense regard for all life, even of the tiniest insect, was as much a religion with her as the worship of beauty was with Garth. She never could pretend sorrow over these accounts of shooting accidents, or falls in the hunting-field. When those who went out to inflict cruel pain were hurt themselves; when those who went forth to take eager, palpitating life, lost their own; it seemed to Jane a just retribution. She felt no regret, and pretended none. So now she smiled fiercely to herself, thinking: "One pair of eyes the less to look along a gun and frustrate the despairing dash for home and little ones, of a terrified little mother rabbit. One hand that will never again change a soaring upward flight of spreading wings, into an agonised mass of falling feathers. One chance to the good, for the noble stag, as he makes a brave run to join his hinds in the valley."

Meanwhile the military-looking man had readjusted his eye-glasses and was holding the sheets of a closely written letter to the light.

"No," he said after a moment, "shooting parties are over. There is nothing doing on the moors now. They were potting bunnies."

"Was he shooting?" asked the girl.

"No," replied the owner of the letter, "and that seems such hard luck. He had given up shooting altogether a year or two ago. He never really enjoyed it, because he so loved the beauty of life and hated death in every form. He has a lovely place in the North, and was up there painting. He happened to pass within sight of some fellows rabbit-shooting, and saw what he considered cruelty to a wounded rabbit. He vaulted over a gate to expostulate and to save the little creature from further suffering. Then it happened. One of the lads, apparently startled, let off his gun. The charge struck a tree a few yards off, and the shot glanced. It did not strike him full. The face is only slightly peppered and the brain quite uninjured. But shots pierced the retina of each eye, and the sight is hopelessly gone."

"Awful hard luck," said the young man.

"I never can understand a chap not bein' keen on shootin'," said the youth who had not yet spoken.

"Ah, but you would if you had known him," said the soldier. "He was so full of life and vivid vitality. One could not imagine him either dying or dealing death. And his love of the beautiful was almost a form of religious worship. I can't explain it; but he had a way of making you see beauty in things you had hardly noticed before. And now, poor chap, he can't see them himself."

"Has he a mother?" asked the older woman.

"No, he has no one. He is absolutely alone. Scores of friends of course; he was a most popular man about town, and could stay in almost any house in the kingdom if he chose to send a post-card to say he was coming. But no relations, I believe, and never would marry. Poor chap! He will wish he had been less

fastidious, now. He might have had the pick of all the nicest girls, most seasons. But not he! Just charming friendships, and wedded to his art. And now, as Lady Ingleby says, he lies in the dark, helpless and alone."

"Oh, do talk of something else!" cried the girl, pushing back her chair and rising. "I want to forget it. It's too horribly sad. Fancy what it must be to wake up and not know whether it is day or night, and to have to lie in the dark and wonder. Oh, do come out and talk of something cheerful."

They all rose, and the young man slipped his hand through the girl's arm, glad of the excuse her agitation provided.

"Forget it, dear," he said softly. "Come on out and see the old Sphinx by moonlight."

They left the piazza, followed by the rest of the party; but the man to whom the *Morning Post* belonged laid it on the table and stayed behind, lighting a cigar.

Jane rose from her chair and came towards him.

"May I look at your paper?" she said abruptly.

"Certainly," he replied, with ready courtesy. Then, looking more closely at her: "Why, certainly, Miss Champion. And how do you do? I did not know you were in these parts."

"Ah, General Loraine! Your face seemed familiar, but I had not recognised you, either. Thanks, I will borrow this if I may. And don't let me keep you from your friends. We shall meet again by and by."

Jane waited until the whole party had passed out of sight and until the sound of their voices and laughter had died away in the distance. Then she returned to her chair, the place where Garth had seemed so

near. She looked once more at the Sphinx and at the huge pyramid in the moonlight.

Then she took up the paper and opened it.

"Enable with perpetual light
The dulness of our blinded sight."

Yes — it was Garth Dalmain — *her* Garth, of the adoring shining eyes — who lay at his house in the North; blind, helpless, and alone.

CHAPTER XIV

IN DERYCK'S SAFE CONTROL

THE white cliffs of Dover gradually became more solid and distinct, until at length they rose from the sea, a strong white wall, emblem of the undeniable purity of England, the stainless honour and integrity of her throne, her church, her parliament, her courts of justice, and her dealings at home and abroad, whether with friend or foe. "Strength and whiteness," thought Jane as she paced the steamer's deck; and after a two years' absence her heart went out to her native land. Then Dover Castle caught her eye, so beautiful in the pearly light of that spring afternoon. Her mind leaped to enjoyment, then fell back stunned by the blow of quick remembrance, and Jane shut her eyes.

All beautiful sights brought this pang to her heart since the reading of that paragraph on the piazza of the Mena House Hotel.

An hour after she had read it, she was driving down the long straight road to Cairo; embarked at Alexandria the next day; landed at Brindisi, and this night and day travelling had brought her at last within sight of the shores of England. In a few minutes she would set foot upon them, and then there would be but two more stages to her journey. For, from the moment she started, Jane never doubted her ultimate destination, — the room where pain and darkness and despair must be waging so terrible a conflict against

the moral courage, the mental sanity, and the instinctive hold on life of the man she loved.

That she was going to him, Jane knew; but she felt utterly unable to arrange how or in what way her going could be managed. That it was a complicated problem, her common sense told her; though her yearning arms and aching bosom cried out: "O God, is it not simple? Blind and alone! My Garth!

But she knew an unbiassed judgment, steadier than her own, must solve the problem; and that her surest way to Garth, lay through the doctor's consulting-room. So she telegraphed to Deryck from Paris, and at present her mind saw no further than Wimpole Street.

At Dover she bought a paper, and hastily scanned its pages as she walked along the platform in the wake of the capable porter who had taken possession of her rugs and hand baggage. In the personal column she found the very paragraph she sought.

"We regret to announce that Mr. Garth Dalmain still lies in a most precarious condition at his house on Deeside, Aberdeenshire, as a result of the shooting accident a fortnight ago. His sight is hopelessly gone, but the injured parts were progressing favourably, and all fear of brain complications seemed over. During the last few days, however, a serious reaction from shock has set in, and it has been considered necessary to summon Sir Deryck Brand, the well-known nerve specialist, in consultation with the oculist and the local practitioner in charge of the case. There is a feeling of wide-spread regret and sympathy in those social and artistic circles where Mr. Dalmain was so well known and so deservedly popular.

"Oh, thank you, m'lady," said the efficient porter when he had ascertained, by a rapid glance into his palm, that Jane's half-crown was not a penny. He had

a sick young wife at home, who had been ordered extra nourishment, and just as the rush on board began, he had put up a simple prayer to the Heavenly Father "who knoweth that ye have need of these things," asking that he might catch the eye of a generous traveller. He felt he had indeed been "led" to this plain, brown-faced, broad-shouldered lady, when he remembered how nearly, after her curt nod from a distance had engaged him, he had responded to the blandishments of a fussy little woman, with many more bags and rugs, and a parrot cage, who was now doling French coppers out of the window of the next compartment. "Seven pence 'apenny of this stuff ain't much for carrying all that along, I *don't* think!" grumbled his mate; and Jane's young porter experienced the double joy of faith confirmed, and willing service generously rewarded.

A telegraph boy walked along the train, saying: "Honrubble Jain Champyun" at intervals. Jane heard her name, and her arm shot out of the window.

"Here, my boy! It is for me."

She tore it open. It was from the doctor.

"Welcome home. Just back from Scotland. Will meet you Charing Cross, and give you all the time you want. Have coffee at Dover.

DERYCK."

Jane gave one hard, tearless sob of thankfulness and relief. She had been so lonely.

Then she turned to the window. "Here, somebody! Fetch me a cup of coffee, will you?"

Coffee was the last thing she wanted; but it never occurred to any one to disobey the doctor, even at a distance.

The young porter, who still stood sentry at the door

of Jane's compartment, dashed off to the refreshment room; and, just as the train began to move, handed a cup of steaming coffee and a plate of bread-and-butter in at the window.

"Oh, thank you, my good fellow," said Jane, putting the plate on the seat, while she dived into her pocket. "Here! you have done very well for me. No, never mind the change. Coffee at a moment's notice should fetch a fancy price. Good-bye."

The train moved on, and the porter stood looking after it with tears in his eyes. Over the first half crown he had said to himself: "Milk and new-laid eggs." Now, as he pocketed the second, he added the other two things mentioned by the parish doctor: "soup and jelly;" and his heart glowed. "Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things."

And Jane, seated in a comfortable corner, choked back the tears of relief which threatened to fall, drank her coffee, and was thereby more revived than she could have thought possible. She, also, had need of many things. Not of half crowns; of those she had plenty. But above all else she needed just now a wise, strong, helpful friend, and Deryck had not failed her.

She read his telegram through once more, and smiled. How like him to think of the coffee; and oh, how like him to be coming to the station.

She took off her hat and leaned back against the cushions. She had been travelling night and day, in one feverish whirl of haste, and at last she had brought herself within reach of Deryck's hand and Deryck's safe control. The turmoil of her soul was stilled; a great calm took its place, and Jane dropped quietly

off to sleep. "Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things."

Washed and brushed and greatly refreshed, Jane stood at the window of her compartment as the train steamed into Charing Cross.

The doctor was stationed exactly opposite the door when her carriage came to a standstill; mere chance, and yet, to Jane, it seemed so like him to have taken up his position precisely at the right spot on that long platform. An enthusiastic lady patient had once said of Deryck Brand, with more accuracy of definition than of grammar: "You know, he is always so very *just there*." And this characteristic of the doctor had made him to many a very present help in time of trouble.

He was through the line of porters and had his hand upon the handle of Jane's door in a moment. Standing at the window, she took one look at the firm lean face, now alight with welcome, and read in the kind, steadfast eyes of her childhood's friend a perfect sympathy and comprehension. Then she saw behind him her aunt's footman, and her own maid, who had been given a place in the duchess's household. In another moment she was on the platform and her hand was in Deryck's.

"That is right, dear," he said. "All fit and well, I can see. Now hand over your keys. I suppose you have nothing contraband? I telephoned the duchess to send some of her people to meet your luggage, and not to expect you herself until dinner time, as you were taking tea with us. Was that right? This way. Come outside the barrier. What a rabble! All wanting to breakevery possible rule and regulation,

and each trying to be the first person in the front row. Really the patience and good temper of railway officials should teach the rest of mankind a lesson."

The doctor, talking all the time, piloted Jane through the crowd; opened the door of a neat electric brougham, helped her in, took his seat beside her, and they glided swiftly out into the Strand, and turned towards Trafalgar Square.

"Well," said the doctor, "Niagara is a big thing, isn't it? When people say to me: 'Were you not disappointed in Niagara? *We* were!' I feel tempted to wish, for one homicidal moment, that the earth would open her mouth and swallow them up. People who can be disappointed in Niagara, and talk about it, should no longer be allowed to crawl on the face of the earth. And how about the 'Little Mother'? Isn't she worth knowing? I hope she sent me her love. And New York harbour! Did you ever see anything to equal it, as you steam away in the sunset?"

Jane gave a sudden sob; then turned to him, dry-eyed.

"Is there no hope, Deryck?"

The doctor laid his hand on hers. "He will always be blind, dear. But life holds other things beside sight. We must never say: 'No hope!'"

"Will he live?"

"There is no reason he should not live. But how far life will be worth living, largely depends upon what can be done for him, poor chap, during the next few months. He is more shattered mentally than physically."

Jane pulled off her gloves, swallowed suddenly, then gripped the doctor's knee. "Deryck — I love him."

The doctor remained silent for a few moments, as

if pondering this tremendous fact. Then he lifted the fine, capable hand resting upon his knee and kissed it with a beautiful reverence, — a gesture expressing the homage of the man to the brave truthfulness of the woman.

"In that case, dear," he said "the future holds in store so great a good for Garth Dalmain that I think he may dispense with sight. — Meanwhile you have much to say to me, and it is, of course, your right to hear every detail of his case that I can give. And here we are at Wimpole Street. Now come into my consulting-room. Stoddart has orders that we are on no account to be disturbed."